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## **WE MUST TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NATIONAL ELECTION REFORMS**

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Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd succinctly sums up his comprehensive national election reform proposal currently winding its way through Congress as "making it easy to vote and hard to cheat." That basic premise goes to the heart of the most important lesson we should have learned from the historic 2000 presidential election and Florida recount, which is that every vote is precious and every voter must be treated equally.

As adopted by the Senate this spring, the Dodd-McConnell "Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act" is the most important national election reform measure since the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dodd-McConnell sets federal minimum requirements in the following areas: (1) standards for voting systems; (2) provisional voting and voter information; (3) statewide voter registration lists and; (4) first-time voter requirements. It also provides \$3.5 billion in federal grants over five years to states and localities to fulfill the requirements.

Connecticut could benefit directly in a number of ways, because it would provide funding for new voting technology, the completion of the Secretary of the State's computerized statewide voter registration system and for making polling places more accessible for the disabled.

At my urging, incentives were included to assist states with establishing and completing centralized voter registration systems. Numerous national election studies such as the National Commission on Federal Election Reform co-chaired by former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford and the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project have identified centralized voter registration systems as the cornerstone of voting reforms. Nine states have passed legislation establishing centralized voter registration systems since the 2000 presidential election.

Centralized voter registration is the best way to protect voters' rights and prevent fraud, and I am proud to say Connecticut is further along than most states considering our percentage of voters and system technology. Of the state's 169 municipalities, 148 have already joined the system, which represents 87% of Connecticut's two million registered voters.

Senator Dodd's bill will be extremely helpful as we continue to work town by town to convince the remaining 21 municipalities of the system's merits and we complete our statewide voter registry.

Exploring new voting technologies is also critical for our state if we are to be ready to take

full advantage of the federal money that could soon become available. Our lever voting machines have proven reliable for almost a century in Connecticut, but unfortunately are no longer manufactured and eventually will have to be replaced.

I have proposed testing computerized touch screen voting machines on Election Day in a cross section of towns to see if this is the type of technology we should consider for the future. My plan includes exit polling to gauge voter reaction to using computerized voting machines.

Touch screen voting technology offers many benefits when compared to the capabilities of our current mechanical lever machines. Touch screens can prompt a voter to consider all offices and questions on a ballot, which are often overlooked by voters who can easily miss an important referendum question, local charter revision or constitutional amendment.

Most computerized voting machines can also ask a voter if his or her vote was cast correctly. For instance, the machine can prompt the voter with the question: "Did you intend to vote for candidate X?"

New technology will also greatly improve ballot access for the state's estimated 400,000 potential voters with disabilities, as well as senior citizens and others needing assistance on Election Day.

There are an estimated 30 million persons with disabilities eligible to vote in the U.S., but according to a 1999 Harris poll, fewer than 30% of these potential voters voted in the 1996 presidential election. This means hundreds of thousands of Connecticut's citizens with disabilities do not vote.

During the 2000 presidential election, the General Accounting Office found that not one of the 496 polling places checked nationwide, including in our state, had voting equipment adapted for blind voters. In Connecticut, blind and visually impaired voters must rely on a poll worker or a person they bring with them to assist in casting a ballot. With special audio hook-ups and touch screen technology, all voters are afforded equal opportunity to cast private, independent and confirmed ballots.

New voting technology and completion of our centralized voter registration system in concert with federal reforms and funding will move us ahead as a state and nation by strengthening the election process, which is the foundation of our democracy.

A Congressional conference committee charged with forging a compromise between Dodd-McConnell and the House-approved Ney-Hoyer "Help America Vote Act" will ultimately decide what exactly to send President Bush as a final proposal. It is clear that the stars have begun to align over Washington on election reform. We will soon be witnessing the federal government's first significant financial commitment ever to improving the nations' voting process.

We can significantly strengthen our democracy by protecting the rights of voters and making

sure that every vote is counted. As a state facing severe budget constraints, Connecticut must stand ready to seize the opportunity that federal election reform along with its funding is ready to offer.